

## DOMESTIC ABUSE IN LATER LIFE\*

### Cultural Considerations

Do cultural values play a role in defining what is considered abusive behavior? Are members of some cultural groups less willing to report abuse or accept services? Do cultural groups have different perceived roles for elders in their communities? Are family members expected to provide care for their aging parents? Are aging parents expected to provide support (emotional and financial) for their adult children?

Professionals must understand how cultural differences can affect how community members define abuse and what services victims may be willing to accept. This paper will examine the research on domestic abuse in later life that focuses on cultural considerations.

This series of papers<sup>†</sup> defines domestic abuse in later life as male and female victims, age 50 and older, abused by someone in a trusted, ongoing relationship like a spouse/partner, family member, or caregiver. The victims lived primarily in the community, not institutions (e.g., nursing homes). Studies from the United States and Canada were included.

### ARTICLES REVIEWED

Twelve articles published between 1989 and 2000 were reviewed for this article. The studies gathered data by interviewing older persons from cultural groups and comparing attitudes of different cultural groups. Populations studied included African American, Caucasian/European American, Hispanic, Japanese American, Korean American, Mexican, Native American, Navajo, Puerto Rican, and Vietnamese American. This paper focuses on racial/ethnic groups because the authors did not find studies describing issues for other cultural (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) or religious/spiritual groups.

Author(s) Pub. Date	Sample size and demographics	Type(s) of abuse covered <sup>§</sup>	Selected finding(s) (page number/s in parentheses)
Moon and Benton 2000	Interviews of 100 African American, 95 Korean American and 90 white elders age 60 or older living in LA	Physical, medical, verbal, psychological, financial, and neglect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In general, African Americans and White elderly had similar responses compared to Korean American elderly. (298)</li><li>• “White elderly respondents were significantly more likely to tolerate verbal abuse than the other groups.” 30% of whites, 8.4% of Korean Americans, and</li></ul>

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\* This series of articles is dedicated to Dr. Rosalie Wolf, internationally renowned researcher on elder abuse and domestic abuse in later life. We miss her gentle guidance, wisdom, and dedication to elder victims.

† This article is part of a series of papers examining research on domestic abuse in later life. To link to the other articles, see the note at the conclusion of this paper.

§ For a chart with a more detailed description of the different definitions of abuse, see the National Center on Elder Abuse website at [www.elderabusecenter.org](http://www.elderabusecenter.org).

	County, CA in 1997. Purposive and convenience sampling methods were used to find participants. 2/3 participants were female.		<p>3% of African Americans said it was okay for adult children to occasionally yell at their parents. (293)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 45.3% of Korean Americans agreed it was okay for an adult child to use his parent's money for himself, compared to 2.2% of whites and 2% of African Americans. (293)</li> <li>• 58.1% of Korean Americans, 37% of African Americans, and 24.4% of white elders believed elder abuse is committed mostly by mentally ill persons or substance abusers. (295)</li> <li>• "Korean American respondents were significantly more likely than respondents in the other groups to blame the victims for the occurrence of elder abuse." (299)</li> <li>• "Korean American elderly respondents held significantly more negative attitudes toward involvement of persons outside the family in elder abuse incidents, as well as toward reporting of such incidents to the authorities and the consequences for perpetrators." (299)</li> <li>• "[T]he majority of respondents from all 3 groups studied believed that incidents of elder abuse should not be reported to the authorities until they are absolutely sure that abuse has occurred." (300)</li> <li>• "Ethnic-specific approach to public outreach and educational efforts may be more effective than a more general approach in increasing the awareness and understanding of elder abuse issues pertinent to each ethnic community." (301)</li> <li>• "Public educational outreach efforts for prevention of and intervention in elder abuse should target recent immigrant populations who are not familiar with the American legal and social service systems related to elder abuse." (301)</li> </ul>
Hudson and Carlson 1999 (a)	424 Caucasians, 318 African Americans, and 202 Native	Elder abuse (not including neglect)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "[Responding to 37 possible abuse scenarios,] [t]he Native Americans ranked [4] more items as abusive and 22 items at a higher level of severity than did</li> </ul>

	Americans aged 40+ (mean age 62) in 6 N. Carolina counties		the African Americans, who rated [3] more items as abusive and 15 as more severe than did Caucasians.” (196)
Hudson, et al 1999 (b)	Interviews of 944 community dwelling persons in NC ages 40 – 93 years old. 424 White Americans; 318 African American; and 202 Native Americans. Half of the sample was aged 40-64, half 65+. Half were female, half male.	<p>“Elder mistreatment: destructive behavior that is directed toward an older adult, occurs within the context of a relationship connoting trust and is of sufficient intensity and/or frequency to produce harmful physical, psychological social and/or financial effects of unnecessary suffering, injury, pain, loss, and/or violation of human rights and poorer quality of life for the older adult.”</p> <p>“Elder abuse: aggressive or invasive behavior/action(s) or threats of same, inflicted on an older adult and resulting in harmful effects for the older adult.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “[T]he majority of each of the groups indicated that one incidence of yelling or swearing at, slapping, or hitting an elder is sufficient to warrant the label of elder abuse. This view contrasts with the experts’ view...[that abuse must be] ‘of sufficient frequency and/or intensity.’” (925)</li> <li>• “What may not be perceived as abuse by a professional who represents one racial or cultural group, may well be perceived as such by the abuse participants who represent another racial or cultural group. The reverse may also be true.” (936)</li> </ul>
Moon and Evans-Campbell	Interviews of 95 Korean-Americans and 90	Awareness of formal or informal sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Only 28% of Korean-Americans, compared to 62% of Caucasians, knew of an agency, organization, or a professional</li> </ul>

1999	Caucasian elders age 60 and over in Los Angeles	of help for elder mistreatment or abuse	<p>to turn to for help if they were abused or mistreated.” (8)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of the 27 Korean Americans who knew of a professional source of help, 22 named Korean American agencies. The remaining 5 mentioned the police. (8-9)</li> <li>• “Over one-quarter of Korean Americans (28%) and 3% of Caucasians could not identify a signal source of help, informal or formal, to turn to if they were being abused.” (10)</li> <li>• “Most elderly respondents, regardless of ethnicity, would turn to an informal source of help, the police, or a general social service agency providing services to the elderly rather than APS.” (20)</li> </ul>
Sanchez 1999	62 individuals age 60+, Mexican immigrants or Mexican-American, from community centers in Detroit, MI, and Carson City, NV	Physical abuse, neglect, financial abuse, and denial of shelter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “40 respondents (64.5%) believe parents are responsible for helping their children with care for grandchildren and with providing money/resources as needed and do not consider this exploitative.” (71)</li> <li>• “Conversely, 52 respondents (83.9%) believe adult children are responsible for helping their parents with care and, if necessary, financial assistance.” (71)</li> <li>• If a neighbor were being hurt, fewer than ¼ would report to authorities; more than half would talk to family members; the remainder would say nothing. (72)</li> <li>• If the elder themselves were being abused, 2/3 would talk with family members before contacting authorities. 15% would contact authorities. (73)</li> <li>• “Admitting abuse brings shame to the family.” (75)</li> </ul>
Tomita 1999	Two focus groups of Japanese-Americans (age unclear) and 25 interviews of Japanese Americans in Seattle and Hawaii, aged 65+	Purpose of study was to “capture the Japanese American definitions of mistreatment” (120)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The primary Japanese approach to conflict is “group above self,” conflict avoidance and an acceptance of suffering. (125-136)</li> <li>• “The cultural message is to protect the community by not discussing with outsiders anything that would dishonor it [including abuse].” (129)</li> </ul>
Anetzberger 1998	62 adults from Cleveland and	“What are the three BEST things	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Answers varied based on racial background. The worst thing for older</li> </ul>

	Seattle, divided by racial group (European-American, African-American, Puerto Rican, and Japanese Americans) and age (“baby boomer caregiver” and elders 60+)	(in order of importance) that a family member can do for an elderly person?” “What are the three WORST things (in order with the worst thing first) that a family member can do to an elderly person?”	<p>European American and Puerto Ricans was psychological neglect. For older Japanese Americans and African-Americans, it was psychological abuse.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For the younger generations, Puerto Ricans and Japanese Americans said psychological abuse, but European Americans and African Americans named physical neglect as worst. (144)</li> <li>• 100% of the older Japanese Americans but only 28.6% of younger Japanese Americans said providing emotional support was the most important thing family members could offer elders. (144)</li> </ul>
Otiniano 1998	24,648 Hispanic elders referred to the Texas APS system from 1991-1995	Cases referred to APS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Reluctance of Hispanic victims to become involved in services to ameliorate their situation is a major barrier to effective intervention.” (194)</li> </ul>
Le 1997	20 Vietnamese age 60+, living in a house headed by an adult child, at least somewhat dependent on child, in Southern California	Verbal, emotional, financial and physical abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victims were more likely than non-victims to be female, unable to speak English, and financially dependent on their child/ren. (57)</li> <li>• 80% do not know how to report abuse; 70% would not want to complain about family mistreatment. (56)</li> <li>• Most of the respondents preferred to keep their problems to themselves because of their reluctance to reveal family problems and risk potential embarrassment and fear of raising conflicts among their children/relatives. (56-57)</li> </ul>
Griffin 1994	10 abused African Americans age 60+ and 6 of their perpetrators from 3 rural counties in North Carolina	APS-substantiated cases of financial exploitation (6), self-neglect (5), verbal abuse (2), and neglect (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “African American perpetrators of elder abuse are adults involved in dependent, mutually beneficial relationships with elders. These relationships may involve emotional maltreatment of the adult children in the form of ‘encouraged’ infantilism.” (23)</li> </ul>
Moon and Williams 1993	30 African American, 30 Caucasian American and 30 Korean American women aged 60-75 in	Participants rated whether and how much 13 scenarios involved abuse. “The scenarios included physical,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “[C]onsiderable ethnic group differences exist in the perceptions of elder abuse, and the Korean Americans on the average were less sensitive to or more tolerant of potentially abusive situations than the other two groups.” (389)</li> <li>• “The data...clearly indicate that</li> </ul>

	Minneapolis, Minnesota	psychological, verbal, sexual, medical mistreatment, neglect, and financial exploitation.”	<p>perceiving a situation as abusive or problematic is a strong predictor of the person’s intention to seek help.”</p> <p>However, “the overall average percentage of those who would seek help was somewhat lower than the percentage of those who identified the scenarios as elder abuse cases.” (390-1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only 17.7% of the African American elders would turn to family for help with abuse, vs. 55.5% of the Korean Americans and 30.1% for the Caucasian Americans. (391)</li> </ul>
Brown 1989	Random sample of 37 Southwest reservation-dwelling Navajo aged 60+ and their family members; 22 cases of elder abuse found	Neglect, verbal/psychological abuse, physical abuse, financial exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most elders perceived by researcher as “financially exploited” felt they were voluntarily sharing their income. (23)</li> </ul>

## GENERALIZED FINDINGS

Four studies compared perceptions by members of different racial and ethnic groups about behavior that constituted elder abuse and found significant differences in the definitions (Moon, 2000; Hudson, 1999a; Anetzberger, 1998; Moon, 1993). Moon found Caucasian elders were more likely to tolerate verbal abuse and Korean Americans more likely to tolerate financial exploitation than her other studied populations (Moon, 2000). Hudson found that Native Americans rated behaviors as more abusive than African Americans, who rated items more severe than did Caucasians (Hudson, 1999). Anetzberger found that European Americans and Puerto Ricans differed from Japanese Americans and African Americans on whether psychological neglect was worse than psychological abuse. This study also found differences between older and younger members of the same ethnic groups (Anetzberger, 1998). Moon found that Korean Americans were more tolerant of abuse than African Americans or Caucasian Americans (Moon, 1993). Hudson (1999b) found that while minority elders agreed with elder abuse professionals’ definitions most of the time, there were some discrepancies between what the elders defined as abuse versus what the professionals said.

One potential reason for the different definitions of abusive behavior is that cultures have a range of expectations about the responsibility of grown children and elders to provide care, financial assistance, and emotional support to one another (Sanchez, 1999; Tomita, 1999; Anetzberger, 1998; Griffin, 1994; Moon, 1993; Brown, 1989).

In general, most of the participants in these studies were reluctant to report abuse (Moon, 2000; Sanchez, 1999; Tomita, 1999; Otiniano, 1998; Le, 1997; Moon, 1993). Moon (2000 and 1999) found that Korean American elders were also more likely to blame the victim for elder abuse, which could affect willingness to report, and were less likely to know of an agency to which they could report. Some study participants were more likely to report abuse if they defined the behavior as abusive, but still often would not report (Moon, 1993). The research indicates that some reasons for non-reporting include shame, embarrassment, not wanting to create conflict in the family, and protecting the community. Some participants expressed willingness to talk to family members rather than professionals (Sanchez, 1999; Moon, 1993).

Moon (2000) suggested that because of ethnic differences around abuse definitions, ethnic-specific approaches to public outreach and educational efforts may be more effective than a general approach.

## **LIMITATIONS OF STUDIES**

Numerous limitations in the research on abuse in later life were found. In part because of the lack of financial resources, only a few studies have been large (more than 1,000 respondents) random sample studies (Lachs 1997a; Podnieks, 1992a; Pillemer, 1988). Even these large studies ultimately based their conclusions on relatively small numbers of abuse victims, ranging from 47 to 80. Only one of the random sample studies included cognitively impaired elders (achieved by interviewing other family members), but using the reports of proxies is considered unreliable (The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2001).

All the other studies had serious sampling biases because they were based on elders who were using services of some sort and/or were known to adult protective services or domestic violence programs. This is problematic, because it is clear that many abused elders are isolated and do not come to the attention of professionals or seek help. With one exception (Otiniano, 1998), these studies also involved relatively small samples – 10 to 401, with the majority being under 100. Respecting the confidentiality and safety of victims creates problems with many scientific methods. Very few studies used control groups.

In addition, some elders deny that what they are experiencing is abuse (see, for example, Phillips, 2000), introducing another source of underreporting. Perhaps more importantly, studies have shown that elders' definitions of abuse do not always correspond to professionals' definitions, which may confound findings.

Comparing results across studies is practically impossible. These studies varied widely in: the types of abuse studied, the specific definitions of the types of abuse studied; whether abuse was self-reported or from agency records; the age of respondents (which ranged all the way down to 40); whether the target audience was predominately healthy elders or vulnerable adults; and whether only women or men and women were included.

## **POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Existing research indicates that background and cultural values impact how an older person will define abuse. Professionals need to recognize these differences when doing public awareness to discuss prevention, reporting and services. Victims may see some behaviors as normal within their culture and not consider asking for help.

Given the percentages of older persons who say they will not report abuse to authorities but who may talk with family members, training on domestic abuse in later life is needed for the general public. Heightened awareness will give more lay people the tools needed to talk with older people about abuse, available services and safety planning.

More research is needed to examine cultural differences and how to build on the strengths of communities. Future studies should include examining differences and similarities among racial/ethnic groups as well as focusing on populations such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons and religious communities. Research is also needed on the effectiveness of culturally specific services.

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#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Archstone Foundation (ed.). (1998). *Understanding and Combating Elder Abuse in Minority Communities: An Exploration of the Growing Epidemic of Elder Abuse*.

Cook-Daniels, L. (1997). Lesbian, Gay Male, Bisexual, and Transgendered Elders: Elder Abuse and Neglect Issues. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 35 – 49.

Tatara, T. (ed.) (1999). *Understanding Elder Abuse in Minority Populations*. Taylor and Francis.

For a list of research questions on elder abuse and domestic abuse in later life, go to <http://www.elderabusecenter.org/research/agenda.html>.

For other articles in this series (ADD LINKS TO OTHER 8 ARTICLES).



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